

STEPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Objective:

To help community outreach workers develop relationship-building skills to support efforts toward community change

Intended Use:

This tool guides workers in building relationships with residents.

Audience:

- Managers and front-line staff: To support their neighborhood outreach efforts

Outcome:

- Workers improve their ability to engage residents, so that more neighbors participate.

Context:

Engaging residents in vulnerable communities in community change activities can be difficult. Social isolation, mistrust of outsiders, and fear of retaliation can all act as barriers. The work requires committed individuals who are capable of reaching out and building relationships, often one by one, with neighborhood residents. This relationship-building is the critical first step in any community change initiative.

A “knock-and-talk”—an informal conversation between an outreach worker and a resident—is a powerful way of meeting people at the neighborhood level and assessing their hopes and concerns. The process of meeting people in their home or yard and really listening to them is frequently a new experience.

All too often, individuals and organizations engaged in neighborhood work come with an agenda or program that they tell residents is “in their best interests.” And while the proposed work may, in fact, be helpful to individuals and families, it is not the residents’ agenda and may not reflect their concerns. When this happens, it is no wonder that residents don’t want to participate in activities or come to meetings.

The knock-and-talk process moves the neighborhood worker from selling his agenda to listening to the needs of residents. Understanding the way in which residents view and experience issues allows for a bottom-up approach to identifying issues and devising solutions that reflect the strengths and weaknesses of those affected.

Tip:

Choose staff carefully to participate in knock-and-talk activities. Some workers are uncomfortable approaching people in their homes, some may feel unsafe. It is often helpful to identify a resident with whom your program already has a relationship to provide entree to others in the neighborhood. The individual can accompany staff members on their initial visits to the neighborhood, and help establish your credibility as someone who can be trusted.

STEPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

KNOCK AND TALKS

GENERAL OVERVIEW: THE WHOLE PROCESS

- To establish relationships with neighborhood individuals, look for potential leaders, to make an assessment of what is happening in any neighborhood, and/or to obtain support for work that will be done in their own community.
 - The Knock and Talk is one of the most effective ways to contact potential resident partners and can be adapted to build relationships in the community.
 - The Knock and Talk is a direct contact with a resident, parent, or business person who you may want to team up with to work on a project like a neighborhood revitalization, community action group or neighborhood watch. If this outreach activity is done properly, personal relationships will be formed to create a solid foundation for making positive changes in a community.
 - Most of the time you will need to do a “cold canvassing” also known as a “cold call” which means that it will be a direct approach to persons about whom you have no information. Since you need to include individuals from the neighborhood you must contact residents face-to-face.
 - The chances of having a successful interview increase when you call on a resident as a result of a common acquaintance to provide you with a “referral.” When you meet someone for first time and mention that a common friend or acquaintance has given you permission to use his/her name as a reference, you will automatically be afforded some degree of acceptance, a “borrowed prestige,” which will allow your contact to be more open to hear what you have to say. Referrals of this sort usually work to your advantage.
 - There are three different types of people you want to reach through Knock and Talks:
 1. Families with whom your partners have existing relationships i.e. Head Start families, Neighborhood Watch members, and other neighborhood residents.
 2. Candidates to participate in the leadership development training program. The goal is to recruit more families and community members to learn leadership skills that will help improve the quality of life of the families and their surrounding community.
 3. The community at large. This outreach process is designed to recruit community members to work in specific projects that are going to benefit the surrounding families and community.
- Keep in mind, this activity can go outside the boundaries of a specific target neighborhood. It is often useful to work with residents outside a specific neighborhood on issues such as in a campaign for a citywide policy change or community awareness campaign.
- The key skill that we must develop fully is LISTENING, LISTENING, and LISTENING! This is one of the most critical communication skills. To better understand the issues of our communities, we need to take sufficient time to listen to those individuals we are trying to recruit in our outreach efforts.
 - You are bringing good news but be prepared for some rejection. Remember, people have a built-in fear of strangers so this is not personal.
 - Be prepared to knock on a door at least five times in a one-month period if you do not get a positive answer on the first attempt.

SPECIFIC STEPS IN THE PROCESS

FIRST VISIT:

Your goal is to build relationships, provide brief information about your work and obtain some information about the neighborhood.

STEP # 1: What We Need to Know Before Going in the Neighborhood

1. Dress appropriately for the neighborhood you will be working on. Do not over/under dress since both can offend residents.
2. You must have a positive frame of mind. You are promoting an idea that is going to assist the residents.
3. Go in pairs. It is better if you go with someone from the neighborhood or familiar with it. If you still are in the process of finding a resident to go with you, you may need to team-up with a co-worker for the first couple of visits to the neighborhood.

STEP # 2: What We Need to Know Before Knocking on the Door

1. Make an assessment of the physical environment of the neighborhood. Drive around several blocks in the area to get a general sense of the area. Things to look for: litter on the street, run down homes, front yards with furniture to be discarded, broken fences, abandoned cars, liquor/beer bottles, as well as well kept properties, green front yards, clean cars, etc.
2. Check the condition of the surroundings of the house you are visiting (front yard, stairs, paint, backyard, if visible, side of the house, etc.). Look for cleanliness, and deterioration. Check for names on the door or mailbox so you can address people by their names.
3. Make several copies of the “Activity: Knock and Talk” form and place them in a binder to create a “Knock and Talk Log Book” specific to the neighborhood you will be assigned to work.
4. Be sure to bring along this Log Book to record as much detailed information about your visit as possible, since the next visit may be performed by another outreach worker.
5. This Log Book should be available to any team member working on this project and wanting to know the progress of this activity. Also, any outreach worker must review this Log Book before heading out to the neighborhood.

STEP # 3: How to Perform the Knock and Talk

1. Ring the bell or knock on the door, up to 3 times, giving time for people to come to the door (elderly, busy, etc.) If there is no answer, make a notation on the Log Book, you may need to come back at different time and/or day.
2. As people open the door, be friendly and wear a smile (remember you are bringing good news!) Be aware that the first 30 seconds are crucial since first impression counts. Your news is about improving the quality of life for their children, their family, and their neighborhood. You will, eventually, be sharing information about services that they may not even know they may qualify for and obtain, if needed.
3. Your intention is to create interest in what you have to say. Ask them if they can spare 10 to 15 minutes of their time. If they agree to spend few minutes with you, proceed with the following steps:
 - a. Identify yourself and the organization you are representing, (give a business card, or show I.D.)

- b. Tell them that you are not selling anything.
- c. Talk about your organization, your program and your role. Indicate that you want them to participate in the process by providing information about issues and problems in their neighborhood and what they think are possible solutions.
- d. After your brief presentation (no more than 5 minutes) about who you are and why you are talking with him/her, they will have sense that there is something to be gained from talking with you. Request permission to ask few questions, stressing the idea that they do not need to answer all the questions if they do not feel comfortable at this time.
- e. While talking with the individual, check your surroundings looking for clues about the quality of life of this person/family (Do they have children? Do they have a computer? Did you notice strong odors coming from the house, visible empty beer bottles, roaches, mice droppings, suspicion of physical abuse, evidence of building problems inside their apartment/ house like mildew, mold, broken pipes, etc.? What is the mood of people? Did they invite you in? Did you feel safe?)
- f. Be mindful of the person's body language while talking with you. (Is this person friendly, making eye contact, smelling of alcohol while talking, drowsy, sleepy, incoherent, blocking the view by placing him/herself in front of the door, speaking through the door screen?, etc.)
- g. If you feel that his/her comfort level is low, ask the person if he/she would like you to come back at another time, ask for the best day and time to come back. Once you have obtained an appointment, provide your business card and suggest that if something comes up and s/he is not available, to call you so the meeting can be rescheduled.
- h. Also, ask for his/her phone number so you can call if something comes up for you that you cannot meet at the set time

STEP # 4: What To Do After Completing the Interview

1. At the end of your meeting, thank the person for the time given to you and commit to keep the person informed of what is happening in relation to the issue you have discussed. Ask if it would be fine to come back and talk with him/her within a week or two.
2. Before going to the next door, write down your comments on your Log Book.

SECOND VISIT:

Your goal is to deepen your relationship with the residents and obtain more information regarding their neighborhood and how it may affect them personally.

STEP # 1: Reinforcing the Trust in You and Your Organization

1. Before knocking on the door, review the documentation from the first visit.
2. If the information was taken by a different person and you have questions, try to talk to the previous interviewer to get clarification or more detailed information before going to the neighborhood.
3. Once in the neighborhood, if you did not do the first contact, identify yourself and the organization and indicate that (name of the first person) was not available and that you are part of the same team. Remember to be friendly and put on a smile as people open the door. Indicate who you are and that you are there to follow up on the meeting he had before with (name of the first person). Share information of what has been happening in the neighborhood since the last visit.

Elaborate on how your organization and partners will be available to help them to improve the quality of life of their children and family, and their neighborhood.

4. Ask them if they can talk with you for about 30 minutes.

STEP #2: ASKING QUESTIONS

1. Your presentation is crucial at this point because you are trying to get information that they may be reluctant to share with you. You can say something like: “many government agencies, non-profit organizations, private enterprises, landlords, etc., try to figure out what to do to improve the city, a neighborhood, a block, the place where you live....but they never bother to ask you, the residents, what you think the problems are and what you think are the solutions.” This is exactly what you are trying to do, you are giving residents a voicean opportunity to have their opinions heard and be included in the decision making process. Your goal is to ensure they understand that you want their voice to be heard.

The best way to do this is by asking, open-ended questions about safety, crime, nuisances, what is good about their neighborhood, what they would like to see improved and how this can be done from their point of view. You never ever promise to deliver anything, you can assure them that their ideas will be seriously considered but you are not making decisions by yourself. Also, be sure to let them know that you will be getting back to them as other ideas and plans may emerge to improve the neighborhood. Stress that you will need their help to make any changes in the neighborhood real.

Be aware that another critical skill to be developed is the ability to ask open-ended questions, like: What problems do you think we should try to work first? Why do you think we should start with that problem? What are some of the things you like about this community that makes you stay here?

2. After you hear what they have to say about their important issues, you will get into the specifics of your visit: collecting signatures, neighborhood revitalization, attending a meeting, recruitment for leadership development training, information about services, participation in the project that you are involved with, etc.
3. At this point, ensure that they understand it will be require some work on their part to achieve their own goals. Your message will be something like this: “I will show the way but you will do the walking.” “I am here to support your efforts.”
4. At the end of your meeting, thank the person for their time and commit to keep them informed of what is happening in relation to the issue you have discussed. Tell them that you will be available if they have questions or if they need some clarification on the conversation. Remind them that you will keep them informed on any new developments.
5. Before going to the next door, write down your comments on your Log Book.

THIRD VISIT AND SUBSEQUENT VISITS:

Your goal is to continue strengthening the relationship and begin to match supports to their needs.

1. Review the documentation from previous visits. If the information was taken by a different person, and you have questions, try to talk to these persons to get clarification or more detailed information.

2. With the resident, review the conversations they have had in the previous encounters and make a point to provide new information. You now want to ask more specific open questions related to the project you are working on by asking the person how s/he would like to be involved. You may want to give examples of different kind of activities: attending neighborhood meetings, joining you in visiting neighbors, cooking for meeting attendees, making phone calls, doing clerical work, participating in trainings, taking a leadership role to mobilize residents, providing child care for meetings, doing translations, etc.
3. Also at this point, you should have materials to hand out that relate to the issues they have discussed before. If no issues were identified, bring some information that may catch their attention and will help to deepen the trust in you. Examples include opportunities for first time home buyers, information that is child related (if they have children), information on job opportunities, etc. If they are immigrants try to obtain material in their native language, or indicate where they can get support services in their language. Remember that people will get involved as long as they see a benefit for themselves.
4. By now, you should be able to take notes in their presence. That will give them a sense that whatever they share with you is information not going into the waste basket. Ask permission to document your conversation and if they feel that certain information should not be recorded, honor their request.
5. After three visits you should feel comfortable asking this neighbor to participate in a more active role in the activities you are promoting.

Remember these guidelines are based on neighborhood coordinators' experience. After a few tries you should have your own style based on this guideline. Each person will have his/her own way to approach community members, but in the end, the participation of residents in community activities or supports is what it counts.

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